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# **Learning subversion in the business school: A ‘improbable’ encounter**

Sylvain P Bureau  
ESCP Europe, France

Aris Komporozos-Athanasiou  
University College London, UK

## **Abstract**

Entrepreneurs develop activities that challenge the status quo, break the rules and subvert systems. How can *such a thing* be taught/learnt in a business school? This article contributes to current debates within entrepreneurship studies that aim to address the subversive nature of entrepreneurial activity. We conducted an ethnographic case study of an entrepreneurship course that seeks to re-define the teaching and learning boundaries of subversive activity in a leading European business school. Drawing on the theory of Bakhtin, which has thus far been overlooked in entrepreneurship studies, we unpick the potentiality of art practices in the learning and experiencing of the subversive dimension of entrepreneurship. We employ the concept of ‘dialogical pedagogy’ in order to address calls for more ‘relationally experienced’ approaches to management learning that foreground the conflicts, emotional strains and uncertainties that are embedded in the fabric of entrepreneurial practice. We show how ‘subversive dialogues’ are enacted between students and teachers as they engage in the learning process and discuss implications for critical entrepreneurship teaching in an increasingly commoditized education environment.

## **Keywords**

Dialogical pedagogy, entrepreneurship learning, heterotopia, subversion

## **Introduction**

Entrepreneurship can be seen as an agent of social change which involves the transformation and reinvention of the boundaries structuring our world (Steyaert and Hjorth, 2007: 1). Correspondingly, it is often positioned in extant literature as ‘a subversive activity’ (Bureau, 2013) with the capacity to upset the status quo, to disrupt ‘accepted ways of doing things’ and to alter ‘traditional patterns of behaviour’ (Smilor, 1997). However, the intricacies of teaching such a subversive activity within the normative context of a business school remain surprisingly underexplored, despite the abundance of entrepreneurship courses offered across Western universities today (Kuratko, 2005). This article seeks to unpick some of these complexities, proposing a new approach to engage with subversion. In so doing, we investigate the ways in which teachers and students attempt to address new questions of defining and learning entrepreneurship and explore the possibilities offered to entrepreneurship programmes from a range of milieus, including visual arts and art activism.

Such project is arguably harder in the context of recent shifts experienced within business schools; (post)modern business school pedagogies are increasingly criticized for their failure to challenge contemporary commoditized education (Beyes and Michels, 2012); the image painted of today’s management education is often a rather depressing one – a point starkly brought home by Jones and O’Doherty (2005: 1): ‘The business school has become a cancerous machine spewing out sick and irrelevant detritus, justified as “practical” and glossed up as “business relevant”’. As highlighted by Dey and Steyaert (2007), some of the problems associated with management learning are symptomatic of a larger societal phenomenon of commoditization, resulting in business schools being run as quasi-firms. These setbacks ring particularly true in the case of entrepreneurship education. Recently, educational programmes devoted to

entrepreneurship have proliferated at business schools, from a handful in the 1980s to over 1600 in 2005 (Kuratko, 2005). Today, the vast majority of such programmes is built around single core modules that seek to simulate a type of ‘venture creation’, wherein student teams are put together and, following a number of courses, are instructed to develop and ‘test’ entrepreneurial ideas (Fendt and Bureau, 2010). But do such exercises adequately represent the process of ‘becoming an entrepreneur?’

This article tackles this question, building upon a unique ethnographic case study of an entrepreneurship course offered by a leading European business school. In doing so, it teases out the critical potentiality of pedagogical practices borrowed from fields traditionally seen as alien – or oppositional – to management studies, such as ‘art activism’ (Bureau and Zander, 2014). Inspired by the works of Bakhtin (1981, 1988), we propose that such potentiality can be fruitfully explored through the notion of dialogical pedagogy. Dialogical pedagogy is based upon a stance of viewing the world through dialogical process, involving the tensions and conflicts that are embedded in the relational production of discourse and mediated by a myriad of artefacts and unconscious behaviours (Cunliffe, 2002; Lyle, 2008; Matusov, 2007). We unpack these ideas in depth and illustrate their relevance to entrepreneurship learning. We consider, in particular, how a number of learning and teaching boundaries are drawn up and re-drawn in the application of this approach, and we trace the *heterotopias*<sup>1</sup> that are afforded therein as students and teachers experience relationally the subversive dimension of entrepreneurship.

## **Existing approaches to teach the subversive component of entrepreneurship: limitations and opportunities**

Schumpeter's idea of *creative destruction* has been of key influence in the field of entrepreneurship (Diamond, 2006). The process 'that incessantly revolutionizes the economic structure from within, incessantly destroying the old one, incessantly creating a new one' (Schumpeter, 1994 [1942]: 83) is the steam engine of late capitalism (Schumpeter, 1994 [1942]). Despite these claims, the political aspect of *creative destruction* has never been studied in depth within entrepreneurship education, the focus being mainly on the impacts on competencies and entrepreneurial intentions (Fayolle and Gailly, 2015). The Schumpeterian concept is mainly considered from an economic perspective, where the focus is placed on the evolution of competitive landscapes (Brenkert, 2009; Dyer et al., 2011; Utterback and Acee, 2005). Yet, economic rationality reflects only partially an entrepreneur's motivations and practices, which are always underpinned by a political ideology directing her project (Jarrodi and Bureau, 2016). In other words, the entrepreneur, through her activity and/or organization, challenges to various degrees the social system (by destabilising or discrediting it) in order for a set of new norms to emerge (Hjorth, 2005): she *learns* to be subversive (Hjorth, 2003). If entrepreneurship is a subversive activity that is deeply embedded in such social order, how are we supposed to teach it in the arguably confined space of a business school?

In this article, we take the view that entrepreneurship teaching remains to date surprisingly faithful to a pedagogical model that is disengaged from the emergent, relational and ultimately subversive nature of entrepreneurship activity. The majority of business school curricula follow a linear process starting from idea-finding modules and ending with a preparation of written, structured business plans – usually pitching these plans to 'real audiences' of entrepreneurs (Fendt and Bureau, 2010). Case study examples constitute the base of teaching, requiring students to draw on library resources and navigate the

Internet efficiently so as to understand the challenges faced by entrepreneurs in markets. However, such programmes offer limited opportunities for students to engage effectively with practices that might break the rules, challenge values or subvert the status quo.

Before addressing the difficulties of engaging with this process in entrepreneurship education, it is important to highlight that subversion is itself contingent; ‘to subvert’ is a transitive verb: ‘if subversion does not subvert something specific at a specific moment, it does nothing at all’ (Eribon, 2010). Consequently, the word ‘subversion’ is ‘axiologically neutral’ (Dufrenne, 1977: 10), that is, it takes on a positive or negative value, depending on the choices of the person who utters it. These choices are different for the authority that embodies the system than for the actor who wishes to disrupt the system through subversive action (Bureau and Zander, 2014; Hjorth, 2003; Smilor, 1997). Hence, in what follows, we do not propose a view of subversion as inherently ‘bad’ or ‘good’. Rather, we underline its importance in entrepreneurship and discuss possible pedagogical ways that can be drawn upon to engage with its social and political dimensions.

In response to the so far discussed limitations of entrepreneurship teaching, some curricula have begun to push students beyond the linear teaching model, attempting to engage them with this practical reality following the principles of ‘situated learning’ (Lave and Wenger, 1991). These programmes tend to focus on the exposure of students to emotions (Pittaway and Cope, 2007) and extreme time pressure (Smilor, 1997). According to these perspectives, students should step outside their ‘reality as students’ (Pittaway and Cope, 2007) and actively engage in becoming ‘insiders’ (Brown and Duguid, 1991). Other teaching approaches have enabled instructors to go beyond traditional ‘business planning’ and the ever-influential ‘case study methodology’. Contingency-Based Business

Planning, for instance, aims to break up linear training sessions and encourages the emergence of ‘random situations’ (Honig, 2004). In such a curriculum, students are given the freedom to select the method that most aptly applies to their own needs and the unresolved issues at hand in order to solve the problem (Honig, 2004). The aim of this approach is to circumvent the pre-determined organization of the teaching and learning process, placing pedagogy at the heart of the project itself (Honig, 2004). Similarly, the ‘4-phase methodology’ teaching promotes the discovery and development of new opportunities through the stages of securing, expanding, exposing and challenging (DeTienne and Chandler, 2004). Other courses rely on the principles of action-based learning, where students have a ‘hands-on experience’ and benefit from a more experiential learning through their involvement, for instance, in concrete projects in companies (Honig, 2004: 264, 265) or through the adoption of new roles like that of the artist (Alistair and Marzena, 2008).

Despite their intent to undercut linear entrepreneurial teaching, these approaches too fall short from engaging upfront with crucial relational aspects of entrepreneurial activity, foregrounding a more or less ‘staged’, ‘controllable’ and fundamentally individual-based model of learning. They seem to privilege clear distinctions between polar opposites such as the public and private domains, expert and lay forms of knowledge, or indeed between strictly defined roles of student and teacher, reproducing a set of dichotomies (Beyes and Michels, 2012; Lorino et al., 2011). Overcoming traditional dichotomies necessitates accounting for the relational and embodied aspects of management education (Sinclair, 2005, 2007), which are able to produce new, and *potentially subversive*, learning spaces (Marrewijk and Yanow, 2010). This is not an easy task when it comes to discuss subversion in an educational institution. It can create various tensions and conflicts as subversion produces generally cleavages and scandals (Bureau,

2013). A pedagogy which offers spaces for students to challenge status quo might result in crises of authority and identity. In this article, we offer a concept of subversion in the teaching/learning process that challenges the aforementioned conflicts.

We propose, in particular, a ‘heterotopic’ view of the business school: a multiply layered and socially produced space wherein subversive behaviours manifest in the form of an unfolding ‘heterotopia’ (Hjorth, 2005; Sinclair, 2005; Spicer et al., 2009). We find this notion of heterotopia especially useful in our study of subversion in entrepreneurial learning because, contrary to the concept of ‘utopia’, it describes a ‘world that is not too distant’ (Spicer et al., 2009: 551) from either the lived or imagined realities of learning. This view entails a crucial insight for our understanding of subversion insofar as it illuminates ‘real’ – and indeed reachable – learning spaces, ‘which constitute a sort of counter-arrangement, of effectively realized utopia, in which all the real arrangements [...] that can be found within society, are at one and the same time represented, challenged and overturned’ (Foucault, 1997: 352). Therefore, a heterotopia can be thought of as ‘a place able to transcend its basic social function and to subvert [...] the typical kinds of social intercourse of a society’ (Hook and Vrdoljak, 2001). Hence, one of the most important characteristics of such a space is the foregrounding of ‘otherness’ in providing a new point of view, which can ‘offer critical perspective on other places’ (Hook and Vrdoljak, 2001).

### ***Learning entrepreneurial subversively: introducing insights from Bakhtin’s dialogic process***

We now turn to the Bakhtin’s dialogical theory, which, as we will argue, addresses shortcomings of extant approaches to entrepreneurial education in two key ways. First, dialogic theory contributes to subversive entrepreneurship

through its conceptualization of relationality, as inclusive of dynamic interactions that cannot be riden of conflict, controversy and tension. This relational aspect is crucial in Bakhtinian theory as ‘all learning is at its core social’ (Ball and Freedman, 2004: 8). Meaning can only be produced through dialogic processes among diverse stakeholders, wherein learning is intermediated through language (Pilay, 2013: 50). The concept of dialogic process has been used in organizational literature to emphasize the ways in which voices are represented as ‘narrative powers’ in organizations. Themes studied include, in specific, the dialectical co-existence (relationship) of control and resistance in organizations (Mumby, 2005), how organizational members discursively negotiate meanings during the process of organizational change (Anderson, 2005) and how heterogeneous and multiple voices engage in power contests (Belova et al., 2008). Bakhtin’s dialogical theory is most often used in organizational papers in the form of dialogism (Lorino et al., 2011) or dialogic imagination (Carlsen, 2006), both of which are characterized by ambiguity and contradictions. There is no such thing as one single answer, and polyphony rules: ‘controversy, tension and conflict are modalities of dialogue’ (Lorino et al., 2011: 780). Importantly, in order for this dynamic process to function, interactions are mediated by a diverse set of artefacts such as narratives, drawings, plans and videos, which, however, are not pre-determined but open to change (e.g. Miettinen and Virkkunen, 2005).

Second, Bakhtin’s theory furthers our understanding of subversive entrepreneurship through the conceptualization of subversion as a process of ‘ideology becoming’ that does not operate solely at the conscious level (Bakhtin, 1981; Freedman and Ball, 2004). The dialogical approach is especially concerned with the subversion of meaning and structures (Holquist, 2002). The concept of ideology becoming is proposed by Bakhtin to capture the endless

process through which people develop and change their way of viewing the world – and hence potentially subvert it – through a dialogic process (Bakhtin, 1981). Ideology in this sense does not refer to a consciously held, political belief system, but rather to the ways in which members of a given social group view and re-view the world (Ball and Freedman, 2004: 2). Everyday discourse, which Bakhtin (1981) defines as ‘persuasive discourse’, is central in the *ideology becoming* process in the sense that ‘as we form our own ideas, we come into contact with the discourses of others and those discourses enter our consciousness’ (Ball and Freedman, 2004: 8). This discourse can be understood as ‘what each person thinks for himself or herself, what ultimately is persuasive to the individual’ (Freedman et al., 2004: 1). Importantly, this is fundamentally a collective process, or as Bakhtin (1988 [1970]) aptly puts it,

The idea is alive, not in an individualised consciousness (wherein it degenerates and dies), but it is born, developed, finds and renews its discursive expression, engenders other ideas, only through dialogic process with the ideas of *the other*, that is to say in its consciousness expressed by the discourse. (p. 137; translation ours)

Bakhtin (1981) considers the effect of this persuasive discourse on our conscious to be significantly stronger than the authoritative discourse stemming from hierarchical authority. As we will show in the remaining article, this important insight points to the subtle ways in which the so far discussed learning boundaries may be redefined and subverted, through relational encounters that operate underneath the discursive layer of consciousness.

## **Applying dialogical pedagogy to entrepreneurship education: navigating between monologism and dialogism**

Recent criticisms of management education proposed to develop a dialogical pedagogy where learning is a reflective/reflexive dialogue in which participants connect tacit knowing and explicit knowledge (Cunliffe, 2002). Applying these Bakhtinian ideas in entrepreneurial education, we can argue that in order for learning to be enacted, a persuasive discourse has to be established between students and teachers, wherein the latter provide the former with ‘opportunities for questioning, independent problem solving, argumentation, and reflection’ (Kamberelis, 2004: 104). Yet establishing a persuasive discourse can be difficult in practice due to inevitable shifts towards the two extreme ends of the dialogic spectrum: (excessive) monologism – the solitude of the powerful – or (excessive) dialogism – the solitude of the powerless (Matusov, 2007: 221). On the one end of the spectrum, excessive monologism reinforces existing boundaries, which in the context of entrepreneurial learning is reflected on ‘prepackaged curricula’ that leave no space for ‘divergence’ and on the normative positioning of teachers as ‘experts’ who know and represent the authoritative voice of the institution that they work for (Matusov, 2007: 221). In such conditions, ‘those who behold the truth instruct it to those that do not possess it and are on the wrong’ (Bakhtin, 1988 [1970]: 129; translation ours). On the other end of this spectrum, excessive dialogism suspends boundaries indefinitely, creating a void wherein students may become paralyzed and unable to evolve, surrendering attempts to move beyond established limitations (Matusov, 2007).

Dialogical pedagogy is therefore operative in an *entre-deux* (‘between-two’) situation, where the teacher ‘gains control over the classroom in order to lose it through the development of internally persuasive discourse’ (Matusov, 2007: 233). Accordingly, the learning process can be considered as productive when ‘the establishment of internally persuasive classroom discourse creates the conditions necessary for the students to develop trust in their teacher and for the

teacher to develop trust in the students' (Matusov, 2007: 234). Under this 'regime of internally persuasive critical discourse, the teacher is an equal (though perhaps perceived as a more "skillful") partner in discourse without additional authority beyond of the persuasive power of his or her critical argument in the discourse' (Matusov, 2007: 234). Morson and Emmerson (1990) explore the possibilities of *entre-deux* space, drawing on Bakhtin to introduce an intermediary level between the authoritarian discourse (Morson and Emmerson, 1990: 217) – based on the authority of power and tradition – and 'internally persuasive discourse' (Morson and Emmerson, 1990: 64) – a discourse without authority that is based on questioning, testing and evaluation of statements. Matusov (2007) labels this level the 'authoritative dialogical discourse', which is in turn based on the authority of trust and respect (Matusov, 1990). Yet in the context of an education system, it can be challenging to develop a situation with no authority at all: 'the teacher must gain control over the classroom in order to lose it through the development of internally persuasive discourse' (Matusov, 1990: 232–233). Put another way, the authoritative dialogical discourse is not a way to eliminate authority but rather to 'define the purpose and nature of authority so that it could serve valid educational ends' (Matusov, 1990: 232). We suggest that such a discourse can function as an important intermediary stage for reaching the desired internally persuasive discourse. Through the transition from authoritative to internally persuasive discourse, the teacher loses his or her authority – understood as unilateral control over students – in order that internally persuasive discourse can establish collaborative control among teacher and students over the classroom (Matusov, 2007). We now turn to our ethnographic study of entrepreneurship education to explore these issues in detail.

## Methods

The two authors were both actively involved in the data collection and analysis process. The first author was responsible for the overall design of the course, which he developed to explore the subversive dynamics of entrepreneurship (both pedagogically and in terms of research aims). He led the educational activities carried out through the duration of this module. At the same time, he also enacted the role of ‘auto-ethnographer’ (Ellis et al., 2010), through keeping detailed notes from day-to-day activities and tracking details pertaining to the ‘learning relationships’ developed within the class as well as to his own interactions with the students. The second author led on the collection of the ethnographic data, following closely the activities as an observer, moving within and across different student groups as well as the teaching team. He was in effect an ‘outsider’, in the sense that he had no involvement in the design of the experiment and, importantly, no formal teaching role and relation with students or a professional link with the teaching institution of our study. This position allowed him to take some distance from the teaching team and also observe them, including the first author, as they enacted teaching and learning. He then worked closely with Author 1 (S.P.B.) to develop the analytical framing of the dataset, while triangulation of data was sought by way of creating a co-constructed narrative between the two authors (Kempster and Iszatt-White, 2012).

The data collection process involved systematic recording of the said activities, multiply produced through the use of audio, video and photographic recording, as well as detailed diary notes kept by both authors. The two authors then worked over a period of 6 months (November 2012–April 2013) in order to make sense of collected data and co-construct the case narrative. We applied an abductive approach (Dumez, 2012) moving iteratively between theory and our data. Part of our intention in the article was to reflect on the various relationships

emerging from the course involving both the authors and the students so as to give a more complete perceptive of enacted teaching and learning experiences. Moreover, unlike the scarce attempts to apply Bakhtinian analysis in management learning (Cunliffe, 2002), our approach is not relied exclusively (or primarily) on discourse analysis, but tried to examine closer aspects such as emotions, embodied movements, materiality and identity.

### *Case study: the experiment of Improbable*

Our case study consists of two groups of students, enrolled in an entrepreneurship course which can be taken in either Paris or Madrid. During this programme, students participate in a number of events taking place in multiplicity of locations, both within and outside the conventional space of the business school, over a period of one academic term lasting 3 months. Here, we focus principally on one component of this course, a 5-day workshop activity taking place in the beginning of the term, referred to henceforth as 'Improbable' (Figure 1). Improbable sought to meddle entrepreneurial, artistic and pedagogical activities, by demanding students to actively occupy the roles of entrepreneurs and artists, and hence opening up space for the tensions and relations between these activities to be aired and 'lived out'. Thus, teaching activities as part of Improbable did not only take place in lecture rooms but also in spaces such as museums, studios, streets and galleries. During the first 5 days, students were allocated in groups and asked to create artworks. Teaching included introduction of key theories and methods in entrepreneurship from effectuation (Sarasvathy, 2008) to subversion. The overall course's activities were organized so that they map onto five key practices that we designed to support the analogies between art and entrepreneurial practices: drift, deviation, donation, destruction and

dialogue. For each of these, students had to immerse themselves in the relevant artistic practices through producing an artwork.

For the first topic (e.g. drift), we borrowed theories and techniques developed by the Situationist International movement in the 1950s and demonstrate their relationship with challenges encountered in entrepreneurship education and in entrepreneurship as a life experience. To illustrate this approach, we use the Situationist *dérive*, or drift, to teach effectuation (Bureau and Koufaris, 2012).

For the second topic, we aimed to show how creativity can be leveraged through deviations, discussing the methods of artists such as Marcel Duchamp and Richard Prince. For the third topic (e.g. donation), we explored the value of informal interactions and gift practices in art and entrepreneurship (Becker, 1982; Bureau and Byrne, 2015; Mauss, 1983 [1925]), with an emphasis on emblematic spaces where artists develop informal networks like in the Warhol's Factory. For the fourth topic, we discussed the value of destruction in the creation process, including subversive dynamics which are commonly used in art. In this section, we referred to collectives like Voina and 0100101110101101.org or with artists like Ai Weiwei. Underpinning these topics was a focus on the way artists and entrepreneurs develop dialogues (and not only unidirectional 'pitches') through enacting art practices such as the relational aesthetic.

The team involved in the organization and undertaking of the course was composed of four people: the first author, an independent artist, a videographer and one administrator. The data discussed in this article were collected in the entrepreneurship course of the 2012/2013 academic year, from September to November 2012 in Paris and from January to March 2013 in Madrid. As mentioned, the key timeline on which we focus our ethnographic data is the 5-day period of the 'Improbable' experiment, which took place in the beginning of the

two courses in Paris and Madrid.

### **Insert Figure 1 About here**

A total of 45 students from a diverse mix of backgrounds participated: about two-thirds of the students had management degrees, while the rest arrived in the course from fields such as law, design, political science and engineering.

There are a number of characteristics that allowed such a project to take place within a traditional business school curriculum. First, the teaching team had access to extra-funding from a Chair of Entrepreneurship which makes it possible to pay for a space outside the school and for the artistic intervention.

Second, the teaching team was relatively new to the school, and hence, they did not feel constrained by a particular ‘institutional tradition’ and were able to create the style of teaching they wanted. Moreover, they were in a position of relative professional security, having successfully received tenure, and finally, the School’s research culture is characteristically open to humanities, especially as compared with other competitive institutions.

### **The field account**

We offer below a close description of activities performed over the duration of the course by students. We focus on the first week of the course, presenting the enactment of day-to-day tasks in three of the student groups. To contextualize these activities, we present key moments from the two authors’ ethnographic diaries describing the learning process following the timeline of the events taking place in various spaces of the site. We support this account with some of the students’ own descriptions of the events taking place capturing their emotions and thoughts during the week of Improbable. The following narrative fleshes out the

development and transition to a heterotopia within these spaces, as students and teachers engage in the learning process.

*Day 1: starting within the business school with a traditional ‘creativity task’*

Students gathered at the University’s 19th-century buildings early in the morning for the first day, where they were divided into 10 groups of 3–5 around various general topics, such as finance, fashion and design, food, green, art, society, Europe, new technologies, creative industries, freedom and festival. Most of them had not known each other previously and were meeting for the first time in that morning’s introductory 2-hour lecture. In a first task that the students were quickly assigned, their imagination was called upon by teachers; they were asked to spread in empty classrooms and seminar rooms across different floors of the School and work within their groups in order to ‘bring life’ to a set of comic-sketches that were given to them in cards. This exercise aimed to produce a playful atmosphere and introduced the main challenges of creativity (e.g. deconstruction of taken for granted assumptions). Following this, the groups took to the streets in order to enact a barter exercise and explore different notions of value creation. Starting with a simple pen as their barter (exchange) object, the students were asked to ‘create value’ while affording their own meanings to the type of value the various barters would lead them to during the exercise. At the end of the day, the groups were asked to exhibit the final products of their barters, which ranged from free meals for a homeless person to a pair of expensive sunglasses. In so doing, they acquired first-hand experience of value creation interpreted not solely as the maximization of economic value through barter but also importantly through the value related to the relationships developed during the process.

*Day 2: introduced to an unfamiliar environment and some unexpected methods*

Students met in the morning of day 2 at the space of the main activity for the week, an old warehouse turned into a multi-purpose art space. During this session, members of the team presented an array of theory aiming to familiarize students with important art activist movements and art practices in relation to subversion and creativity. The main task assigned to the students was to produce a contemporary piece of art in the form of an installation (with freedom to include inanimate objects, image, moving image or other media) and a supporting Manifesto to reflect the ‘meaning’ of the work. Each work was limited to 4 ft<sup>2</sup>, and students were free to choose the suitable means to produce and define its content. Students went out to the streets of Paris once again to gather the materials necessary to construct their work of art (a washing machine was one of these objects). We observed how their process of organizing began to follow a more clear pattern; this included some round table discussions among that aimed to ‘define a strategy’, where the ‘message’ of the artwork was discussed in detail.

*Day 3: confined in the art studio for 24 hours to produce the artwork*

The intensity of the hours during the night of the second to third day of Improbable was reflected in the second author’s diary notes from that evening (the names have been changed to preserve anonymity):

*Time 2 a.m.: first sole diary attempt of the night, which is already quite draining. Most of what has happened so far is conversation, about the stage in which the various groups are, regarding their ability and plan to decide on a message and represent it in a creative/appropriate way ... The space is impressive. There are five main rooms, with plenty of sitting space, a nice cosy warehouse aesthetic. The atmosphere has been very relaxed perhaps somewhat in contrast with the tense interaction between the two project*

leaders and (some of the groups); to explain. I realised quickly tonight that there is an explicit strategy in place, according to which Sedrick and Paul are making their iterative assessments, they intentionally dismiss their ideas, almost in a shock strategy, in order to shake them – make them realise that they need to go beyond their compliance to orthodox business school expectations – not to be naïve, banal and conforming. Rather they point out at various points, and sometimes in a rather harsh manner that what students need to do is think of personal stories, challenge what they have inside their heads and hearts.

*Time 3.45 a.m.:* I just had a half-hour long conversation with Sedrick; we talked about the project's origins, his own background; he spoke to me at length about his childhood and growing up, in a very under-privileged background; how it shaped his wish to change educational practices (even within business schools). It was obvious that it was an emotional process for him, as much as it was for the students ...

*Time 5.15 a.m.:* I am exhausted, can barely keep my eyes open ... Everyone has said to me that it's OK to get a couple of hours of sleep, but no-one in the teaching team seems willing to get some sleep ... and they haven't even been drinking coffee! Opposite me, in the kitchen area of the Cartonnerie, there is group 'voyage'; they are discussing in animated way their artwork's message, sat in a sofa, laptop on laps, exchanging ideas about what/how to phrase things. (Author 2, diary notes)

*Days 3 and 4: finalizing the works and preparing for the big opening*

Once the form and the meaning of the artwork took shape, students had to install their production for the opening. They had to agree on 'the story that they wanted to tell' to the audience, consisting of around 300 people, mainly entrepreneurs and artists, as well as determine the role that this audience would play in the exhibition of their work. In some groups, the public took a more passive role, observing the work and asking questions about the underlying process, whereas in the display of other groups' work, the public was more actively involved in continuing the meaning production process through exhibition.

By day 4, students had begun to reflect on the pressure they had experienced, over the previous 48 hours:

After 12 hours (overnight) we understood that our idea was impossible to materialise. If someone had told me that I didn't have to use a specific space, or materials such as paper, scissors etc. maybe that would have helped me more. (Student, Group 7 Paris)

In their continuous effort to be part of the unusual space and time they were finding themselves in, their sense of a coherent narrative that would reassure progression to achieving higher stages of learning was hence seriously challenged:

In the beginning I tried to impose myself, but then through the night, I said oh, just let it go ... in the beginning we had a lot of hope, let's make it work, but in the end, I don't know if that's to do with the tiredness or not, but like, ok it could be like that, let it go. It's like life ... (Student, Group 4 Paris)

But the challenging of clear boundaries in the collective space of learning did not solely concern students. The teaching team often found themselves uncertain

about their *own* roles, positions and *boundaries* in the dialogic process that they were also involved:

during this type of process, it is hard to find the right position: on the one hand, if you are too close to the students, they might think that you're just a friend; on the other hand, if you are too distant, you cannot develop real dialogues with them. I guess that after *Improbable*, I was sometimes too distant with the students when I met them in the corridors. I think that I needed to reaffirm my formal role of professor after this intense workshop but this was more led by a lack of confidence than anything else as it is not productive at all. I really need to continue to create these contexts which enable these dialogues. (Sedrick: diary notes)

#### *Day 5: retour in the business school (or the final escape?)*

On the fifth day of the programme, the students had to take an individual and written exam to test both the 'acquisition of formal knowledge' and their understanding of this specific experience. The main challenge for all involved in the course as was expressed by the team after the artwork exhibition was to return to the space of the Business School without losing the momentum developed through the unconventional and unexpected encounters of that week. The team tried to avoid such risk, through prompting students to move from their produced artwork to the process of developing a 'real' entrepreneurial event. Students were grouped around the same teams and topics; they were asked to organize 10 events, which had to adhere to some performance indicators and also had to co-define and convey 'real meaning' for a community. Their starting point was the artworks developed during *Improbable*.

To be able to respond to this new assignment, students had to use the resources offered by the Business School, but, once again, they were asked to look beyond

its realm; although the links with the team were maintained throughout and advice was sought and given at various points leading the organization of the event, students – much like in the production of an artwork – had to rely on their own resources from the outside world, developing a further round of ‘barters’ and partnerships.

Moreover, our close observation of the final weeks’ events organized by the groups revealed a profound sense of ownership and a nuanced understanding of concerns relating to the purpose of the tasks performed in the course. Students generally felt under less pressure and somewhat more independent to develop their entrepreneurial activities leading to their events. There was moreover a sense of fulfilment in the course and acknowledgement of its value added to their own development. That sense of ‘learning’ was also shared by the teaching team, who at the end of the project felt, ‘we knew much more what we were doing, how the students would react ... because ... last year, I think it was like being in a swimming pool, you know ... last year we ourselves didn’t know how to swim’ (Sedrick, teacher).

## **Discussion**

### *Heterotopias of crisis and the emergence of subversion in established learning institutions*

The first contribution of our study is that subversion, much like entrepreneurial practice, need not entail an abandonment of or disconnect from established institutional realities, but rather may appear as a transitory space between such realities and the experimental space of a heterotopia, through the experience of a crisis. Entrepreneurial learning is abundant with concepts of ‘rebellion’ and ‘heroism’, reflecting a rather singular focus on the entrepreneur as a person that challenges the status quo (Bureau, 2013). Yet, as the entrepreneurship course

that we presented illustrated, these concepts seem ill-equipped when faced with the question of subversion in the normative context of a business school. Our case departs from these approaches and validates entrepreneurial research highlighting the crucial role of heterotopias when developing innovative entrepreneurial projects (Hjorth, 2003). Following Foucault, the heterotopia that was produced in the discussed experiments can be characterized as a ‘heterotopia of crisis’: a ‘place reserved for the individual or society in a state of upheaval, difficulty or breakdown with reference to the greater environment in which s/he or they live’ (Hook and Vrdoljak, 2001: 70).

This space, as we saw, did not isolate individual students but functioned as a ‘transitory world’ (Watts and Urry, 2008) offering a beginning and an end and enabling a ‘small journey’ for students and teachers alike. Traditional business school students acted as entrepreneurial apprentices taking a transitory role, such as that of an artist, within a transitory environment (e.g. an art space). Teachers too were called to play often-uncomfortable roles, such as that of the ‘art-critic’ or the ‘teammate’, shaking up previously expected, normative pedagogical boundaries. Such a transitory stage, although ephemeral, generated intense feelings in all involvees, in so far as it entailed a disruption in the form of the challenging task of ‘having to let go’ of a ‘stable state’ in order to ‘move to’ a new one. In doing so, it also triggered pleasures that were experienced with the arrival at rewarding new stage; in this sense, *Improbable* seemed to reinforce the pedagogical means through which students and teachers can ‘explore new possibilities for being and acting’ (Cunliffe, 2004: 421).

What appeared crucial in this case was the development of a heterotopic space not *outside* the realm of the (traditional) business school but rather *within* this realm; hence, students and teachers remained focused on producing ‘real outcomes’, be them works of art or entrepreneurial events. The learning process

we observed may have not superficially subscribed to business codes, yet it remained closely linked to the ‘institution of the Business school’ both through making use of its various resources (classrooms, networks, technologies and at a more ontological level: the space occupied through the activities of our ‘improbable course’ is not (merely) experimental, but tied inexorably to existing entrepreneurial reality. In other words, our student performances were far from opposed to ‘real practices’ observed in the business world, but rather *mirrored reality* with all its physical contingencies. It was precisely in the experience of these contingencies that subversion was triggered.

### *Proposing a dialogical pedagogy to learn the subversive dimension of entrepreneurship*

Our second contribution is the development of a method for developing a dialogical pedagogy to enable students to experience ambiguity, contradictions and the possibility of producing (and recognizing) their own discourse. In the field of entrepreneurship, courses and learning tools are typically structured around methods that tend to be instrumental and *monological by design* – they are inherently opposed to raising doubts and contradictions. Yet the most effective entrepreneurial pitches stir emotional responses that disrupt established perceptions and trigger participation in a form of dialogue with audiences where different voices are negotiated. Our case of entrepreneurial learning represented an attempt to open up and enrich the notion of ‘voice’ entering such dialogue.

Drawing on Bakhtin’s (1981, 1988[1970]) dialogic theory, we argued that discourse is only one of the representational modalities that are available to students and teachers in the learning process. Through adopting a multi-dimensional focus, in specific, by projecting dialogism across space, time and role boundaries, we echo Shotter’s (2008) observation that Bakhtin’s (1981,

1988[1970]) approach allows us to re-centre our attention on such crucial aspects of learning negotiation as ‘embodied acts of voicing our words and the bodily feelings they arouse in others and ourselves’, and *not* as commonly observed ‘on language as a formal system of static, repeatable forms functioning according to rules in their application’ (Shotter, 2008: 506). Indeed, through our experiment, we hoped to have shown how a learning method that opens up space for students to experience a dialogic process can lead to new, unexpected and potentially subversive forms of producing entrepreneurial reality.

The pedagogical approach developed in this workshop addresses some of the key challenges faced by entrepreneurship courses: the commodification of education, a singular focus on individual learning and the linear and goal-oriented processes of formal knowledge transfer (Dey and Steyaert, 2007; Fayolle and Gailly, 2008; Fendt and Bureau, 2010). The artworks created by students of the course were produced through a collective process, which engaged a broader team of teachers and participants. Hence, through *Improbable*, students did not merely enter a ‘theory learning’ process, but they also experienced an effectual process: creating art without pre-determined goals, in an uncertain and ambiguous environment (Sarasvathy, 2008). Importantly, such a *detour* with the art world and rules avoided the reproduction of simplifying dichotomies (Beyes and Michels, 2012; Lorino et al., 2011) such as art versus business, creative versus non-creative persons, experts versus amateurs, explicit versus tacit knowledge, rationality versus emotions or the mind versus the body.

Finally, a key finding of our study is the role played by crisis and contradictions. If ‘entrepreneurs are individuals who manage the uncertainties of the entrepreneurial environment, and embrace the chaos and ambiguity of change’ (Collins et al., 2006: 337), we need to develop education programmes which are designed to help students face this type of environment where they will be

‘struck’ (Corlett, 2013). Our suggestion was, thus, that in such a dialogical pedagogy, ‘chaos’ does not simply constitute an element of provided learning context; it *is* itself a type of subversive learning. In this sense, entrepreneurial learning cannot be detached from experiences of failure, frustration and disappointment that are embedded in real entrepreneurial encounters; such tensions constitute an inherent part of relational learning that, as we argued, lies at the heart of disrupting boundaries, generating new meanings and ultimately bridging existing pedagogical structures and the embodied subjective experience of both teachers and students. As our Improbable case illustrated, this process created ‘memorable memories owing to the uniqueness of experience that is *felt* and reflected on’, and these memories afforded ‘self-learning and development beyond the confines of the actual event’ (Sutherland, 2013: 14).

## Conclusion

The case study discussed in this article aimed to shed light on the various instances during the learning process, where students re-turn to the core meaning of entrepreneurship: the ‘living out’ of real life experiences that bring forth the entrepreneur within the student. Through our ethnographic account of the ‘Improbable’ experiment, we identified two perspectives of teaching and learning subversion that embody specific potentialities. First, we discussed how *dialogical pedagogies* point to the ability to move beyond a monological approach, allowing students to engage in critical discourses while experiencing tensions and contradictions (Cunliffe, 2002; Lyle, 2008; Matusov, 2007). Second, we saw how subversion can be engaged with as a *heterotopia of crisis* (Foucault, 1997), evidenced in ‘Improbable’ in the creation of spatial ‘vacuums’ which students can invest with ‘entrepreneurial meaning’ and develop new heuristics and behaviours. In so doing, we suggested that within the orthodoxy of

business school teaching of entrepreneurship, there exist learning spaces that can be both (seemingly) far and (surprisingly) close to the very ‘reality of entrepreneurship’.

We hope that the case presented here could offer new insights to colleagues who wish to develop this form of pedagogy. Workshops like Improbable could be relevant beyond the field of entrepreneurship as many complex issues, such as sustainability, need subversive thinking, but more research projects and experiments have to be done to find the right ways to replicate it in other contexts. Some of the design methods that were important for the success of the teaching programme were as follows: the pairing of an artist and a business school professor in the teaching team; drawing on expertise in mentoring innovation projects; access to teaching space outside the confined space of the business school and ability to generate funds to address logistics challenges; a pedagogical affinity to a humanities curriculum.

It is worth adding some further reflections, wearing, as it were, ‘our teacher hat’. One such reflection concerns the intense feeling of surprise and enthusiasm that students exhibited during the course. Despite the great number of confusing and trying encounters, we were able to experience *with* the students a sense of relief, in the realization that, in the end, ‘we had made it’. This was also linked to sharing a sense of accomplishment, supported, for instance, by the external responses to the course outputs, most notably the produced artworks as well as the final week’s events, which generated equally strong emotions and thoughts by the participating audiences – discussions between students and those audiences were lively and passionate. Of course, it is not always easy to manage such a module. It required long hours (some of which unpaid) and involved a degree of ‘creativity’ in securing the resources needed and in navigating the inevitable institutional constraints. Developing exam questions and grading the

students' responses reflected some of these difficulties inherent to the course. A traditional written and individual exam approach was followed, aiming to assess the students' understanding of the theories taught during Improbable (e.g. effectuation for instance). We wanted to treat the exam process as part of the experience of negotiating the course's tensions, grounding the learning process back onto the traditional space of business school. We were, ourselves, torn regarding the marking criteria employed in this process, faced with the need to provide this grounding and to recognize the group's immense efforts.

To conclude, similar to entrepreneurial life, the 'everydayness' of student and teacher activities in our entrepreneurial course comprised both analytic/structured and embodied/emergent experiences, which were bounded up in complex and unexpected ways. It is in this type of micro-practices of the students' collective and creative engagements that we suggest lies the 'critical potentiality' (Dey and Steyaert, 2007: 450) of management education.

Experiments like Improbable not only 'create opportunities in which participants may be struck and engage in critical self-reflexivity and learning' (Corlett, 2013: 467) but also engage in acting to potentially change society through subversive practices. The 'learning space' inscribed through such conflicts enacts forms of both traditional and experimental organization that both 'create new orders' and 'disassemble existing ones' (Hjorth et al., 2013: 1). However, more needs to be done to better understand the potentiality as well as the risks associated with this pedagogical approach. Indeed, students might use subversive techniques to develop projects which can result in more ethically dubious or politically regressive outcomes. For instance, how could we create a learning process supporting social changes that challenge rather than conform to the neoliberalization of entrepreneurial activities? Our proposed *retour* (return) to the reality – a shift from teaching/doing entrepreneurship '*as if*' to '*it is*' – invites

more serious engagement with ambidextrous nature of subversion as a central component of the entrepreneurial process, which can only be understood through/in practice – a principle that learning entrepreneurship education cannot afford to neglect.

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## **Note**

1. Heterotopias are used here in the sense of ‘other places’ (Spicer et al., 2009) – ‘spaces of play’ that encourage the exploration and imagination of alternative modes of being and doing (Hjorth, 2005).

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## Appendix 1

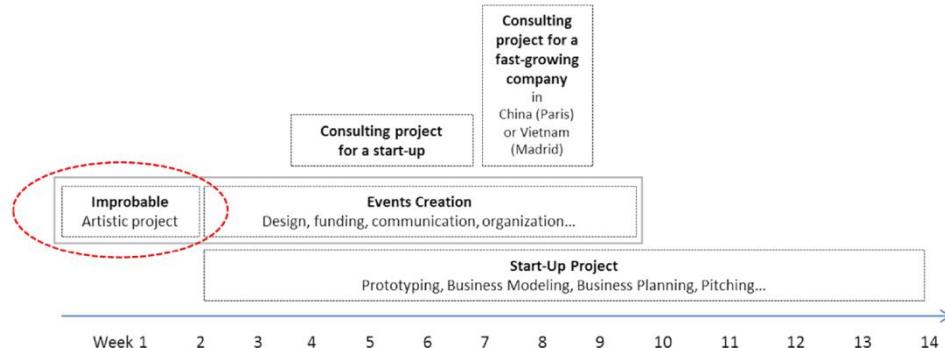


Figure 1: *Improbable and the four projects of the entrepreneurship programme.*



**Image 1:** Two students lost in creation, Paris, La Cartonnerie, 2012

## Appendix 2

### *The funeral of 4.5, Akos, Clement, Stephanie, Inés, Claire*

Our artwork portrays a funeral of a person in 2089. Instead of the usual details about their life, this tombstone contains a peer rating and a global trust ranking of the person. This portrays a future where people's ratings represent their identity even beyond their lives. Trust is nowadays often established through a rating system by an entity, such as Airbnb. But can we only trust those people that have been approved by their peers on a particular platform? We expanded on this point of criticism by painting the scenery of a dystopian/utopian future. This world consists of a pure sharing economy where everyone contributes their resources and skills to the community and receives a peer-based rating for this. However, how much dominance can this system take over the individual? Is there more trust in a society like this or will the value of one's life be defined by their total contribution to society?



## Appendix 3

*Opening, Paris, La Cartonnerie, 2012*

